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The Lepcha Legend of the Building of the Tower
(Die Legende vom Turmbau der Lepcha)

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114 Part of the legendary material of the peoples living in the maharajah state of Sikkim at the foot of the Central Himalayas has already been treated by various people, and also a number of traditions of the Lepchas—the largest group of the original inhabitants of this territory—have been mentioned in numerous publications. (1)

1. Cf. Kali Kumar Das, "The Lepcha people and their notions of heaven and hell," Journal of the Buddhist Texts Society (Calcutta) Volume VI (1896). —C. de Beauvoir-Stocks, "Folk-lore and customs of the Lap-chas of Sikhim," Journal and Proceedings, Asiatic Society of Bengal, N. S. 21 (1925). — G. Gorer, Himalayan Village (London, 1938). — J. Morris, Living with Lepchas (London, 1938).

114 Singularly enough, however, one of the legends best known among
113 the Lepchas has not received—with the exception of two brief references—closer treatment in any of the pertinent works that have appeared to date: this is a tradition that tells of the unsuccessful project of the Lepcha people to construct a tower of clay pots reaching the vault of heaven.

172 One of the reasons for the survival of this legend is the circum-
114 stance that at the supposed site of the tower potsherds have been dug

114 up from time to time by the local population while working in the
172 fields. Two decades ago these findings aroused the attention of a specialist; Sir Charles Bell, at that time Political Officer of Sikkim, had several of the discovered fragments brought to him, and at his direction the legend of the tower was also put down in writing. Unfortunately, however, this material never received a proper evaluation. —Through the courtesy of Sri T. N. Pulger, the owner of the Daramdin estate, within whose boundaries the site of the legendary tower building is situated today, I was able to obtain a reproduction of the report written for Sir Charles Bell and to take it into account in the present work.

/890/ 1. First Version

773 Most Lepchas who know the legend of the tower building are convinced that this enterprise was carried out by the original ancestors of the Lepcha people. This view is also expressed in the following Lepcha text which is reproduced first in orthographic transcription and then in translation.

/Lepcha text follows./ (2)

2. The text was translated with the kind assistance of Pastor T. S. Targain (Kalimpong).

The Story of the Ta-lom Plain

539 Long, long ago, when the creation of the world was completed,
773 the Lepcha people, increasing in number after its creation, descended from /891/ the glacier mountain, (3) and the land of Ma-yel (4) was

3. According to legend, the Lepcha people had its origin on the mountain of Kanchenjunga, from whose glacial ice the original ancestral couple is supposed to have been created.

4. Concerning the land of Ma-yel cf. Gorer, Himalayan Village, p. 235 f.

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539 filled with young Lepchas. At that time they decided to do the following: "We will build a tower in order to climb up to the sky and to pull it down with a hook"; this they had decided. Then they made the decision to pile small clay pots one upon the other [and in this way to build a tower]. The place they chose was the plain of Ta-lom. Here, in order to carry out the work, they divided all the people into three groups: first, a group who formed the pots from crushed earth; second, [a group] of bearers; and third, those who placed the pots in layers; thus they were divided.

Now they heaped the vessels one upon the other and, placing them in layers, they almost reached the sky; at this time they already saw the sky very near; those who were working on top—when they caught sight of the sky so close at hand—thought: "If we had a forked stick, then we could pull down the sky." Then they called down to those who were below: "Hand us a forked stick, we want to pull down the sky!" But those down below understood: "Tear down, knock down!" Those working at the top of the tower then called again: "Hand up a forked stick, we want to pull down the sky!" But those below once again understood: "Tear down!" Now those working below cried: "Shall we tear it down?" Then those above cried out in anger: "Yes, tear down! Tear down!"

So those who were down below now got hammers, axes, and clubs and began to shatter the vessels at the base. When they had already made good progress in their work, the tower suddenly came tumbling down, crushing everything. Those who had climbed up to the top as well as those who had worked close to the foot of the tower were all killed by the clay pots falling upon them. Those who survived could, however, no longer communicate with each other.

But to construct a tower like this, no one was capable formerly except the Lepchas; and the experienced men who could teach such work, these were Lepchas. Up until that time they had all spoken the same language, but now, since they could no longer understand one another, they parted ways. Some of them went up [to the north], some down [to the south]; others to the east and some to the west. As a result of this separation they settled the entire world, and thus there arose the numerous peoples and tribes existing today. —The place to which [the Lepchas] descended from the glacier mountain after their creation, lies in present-day Sikkim, and it is a plain upon which a great rice field is now located.

/892/ 2. Second Version

773 614 Another version of the legend of the tower building, one which makes a claim to greater exactness, asserts that the erection of the tower was not undertaken by the ancestors of the Lepchas, but by a sib belonging to the Lepcha people which had the name Na ong. In present day Lepcha the word Na ong means "stupid fellow," —but it is probable that it took on this derogatory sense only later through the association of the sib name Na ong with the tradition of the absurd and unsuccessful tower building. In addition to the word Na ong sometimes the expression Chelickchom is also used as a designation for this clan; the latter word appears to come from the language of the Limbus, a people related to the Lepchas, and would thus strengthen the view encountered among the Limbus that the so-called Na ong or Chelickchoms were not Lepchas, but Limbus.

114 614 The chronicle of the maharajahs of Sikkim—in which the Na ong are listed among the Lepcha sibs—as well as the few scholarly publications that mention the name Na ong (5) report unanimously that

5. Das, The Lepcha people, p. 5.—G. B. Mainwaring, A Grammar of the Rong (Lepcha) Language (Calcutta, 1876), p. XX. —G. B. Mainwaring and A. Grünwedel, Dictionary of the Lepcha Language (Berlin, 1898), p. 189b. —De Beauvoir-Stocks, p. 359.

that sib has long been extinct. This assertion, to be sure, is not precisely true, for even at the beginning of this century there lived, near the place at which originally the tower was supposed to have been constructed, a family whose members regarded themselves as the last descendants of the Na ong tribe. In designating themselves they used the expression "tribe" /Stamm/. The head of this family, a man named Karandal, seems, however, to have been the only one who was still very familiar with the traditions of the Na ong. It was therefore he who gave the information for the report handed over to Sir Charles Bell. According to the information of the last preserver of the Na ong traditions, the building of the tower and the later history of the tribe ran as follows:

773 539 It was in gray primeval times that the tribe of the Na ong came into the world. The place that supposedly became the birthplace of

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539 this tribe is situated in Sikkim, close to the confluence of the Raman and the Lingkhim Khola, within the realm of the Daramdin Estate. The ancestors of the Na ong, created inside the earth, emerged here from a gigantic hollowed boulder, which one could still see on the bank of the Raman a generation ago. (6)

6. During the heavy rains of the year 1899 this boulder was dragged deeper into the river bed where it is finally supposed to have sunk in the sand.

After their arrival on the surface of the earth the Na ong settled down at the place called Phugamdin, which today lies in the north-eastern part of the great rice field belonging to the Daramdin estate. /893/ — One day they became aware of the vault of heaven spreading above their heads, and since they thought that it was very low, they decided to build a tower of pots in order to reach the sky.* — Since all the members of the tribe declared themselves in agreement with this plan, they immediately began to carry it out. The foundation of the tower was erected on the level surface of the present day Daramdin Field. The work progressed rapidly, and the building finally became so high that only two or three pots were still needed in order to complete the work. Because of this, the men working at the top of the tower became very excited. They called down to the helpers working below to hand up the required number of pots quickly. Now the command was passed down from man to man through the long chain of helpers, and when it finally reached the workers at the foot of the tower, its sense was already completely distorted; for now they understood it to mean that the tower was no longer necessary and should be torn down because the men standing at the top had already reached the sky. The men, women and children on the ground therefore proceeded to smash the lowest pots and as a result the entire construction collapsed with a terrible roar, burying beneath it all the members of the tribe. During its fall the tower broke into three great pieces, one of which fell on the mountain called Kaijalia within the limits of the present day Karmi estate, while a second portion of the tower plunged onto the Maney Hill in the precincts of the Relling estate, and the third piece finally came down near the village of Phedap, in the Nepalese district of Ilam. By the impact the above-mentioned mountains were pressed in to such an extent that today they show a clear saddle form.

113 539 Only a single man escaped from the disaster alive. Frightened by what had happened and fearing the wrath of the divinity, which in his opinion had brought about the annihilation of the members of his tribe, he determined to leave the place of misfortune and to seek an abode in Nepalese territory.

Therefore he went to the village of Phedap, where he married one of the girls of this place. In the course of time once again a tribe was formed from his numerous descendants. It likewise was designated as Na ong. But this generation of the Na ong also didn't prove to be much smarter than its ancestors.

[778] One day the Na ong decided to kill the fish in the sacred river Mai-khola, which flows near the village of Phedap. This river was regarded as the seat of a mighty divinity, to whom at one time thousands of animals were sacrificed once a year by the local Nepalese population. The blood of these animals colored the stream red for days.

The Na ong thought now that the local millet beer, called marwa, was probably the best poison to kill the fish; since it could make a strong man drunk, it was surely well-suited to destroy all the fish living in this river. Therefore they poured /894/ huge quantities of millet beer into the stream, but the divinity of the river, enraged by this sacrilege, killed the entire tribe on the spot. Only a boy and an old woman escaped annihilation.

The woman took care of the boy, and when he had finally grown to manhood, he married, (7) and his descendants again lived in the

7. Tradition does not tell to what tribe his wife belonged.

village Phedap. But the tribe never again flourished — a fact ascribed to the displeasure of the river god who, despite all the sacrifices offered to it by subsequent generations of the Na ong, would not be pacified. When finally only a few Na ong were alive, about sixty years ago, one of them named Kaipal decided to leave the settlement on the banks of the Mai-khola and move with his family near the place where his ancestors had once built the tower; for here—so he thought—the remainder of the tribe would escape the wrath of the river god and, under the protection of the ancestral spirits, would again increase in number. His son Karandal, the transmitter of this legend, later married a Limbu girl from the Malboma sib in the new

113 dwelling place; this marriage produced four sons and three daughters,
539 who, however, were apparently absorbed in the families of the neighboring Limbu. Thus the tribe of Na ong was finally completely extinguished.

113 The place where, according to the legend, the construction of the tower was undertaken is a plateau about two kilometers square situated in the western part of Sikkim, near the Indian-Nepalese border. To the west it is screened by a chain of mountains; to the south and the northeast it is bounded by two rivers. In the deeply fissured landscape of the Himalayan foothills a level plain of such proportions is a great rarity, and hence the plateau is clearly visible from a distance. It was subsequently transformed almost completely into a rice field, and only its extreme eastern corner, which bears the name Phugamdin and where — according to the legend — the first settlement of the Na ong arose, is uncultivated and today serves as a burial place for the Limbus, who recently settled in this part of Sikkim. (8)

8. A scholarly work on the burial methods of the Limbus — as well as an exhaustive investigation of this tribe — has unfortunately not yet been written. According to reports available up to now, the Limbu dead are generally buried, but sometimes cremated. Without doubt, however, the potsherds discovered in Daramdin cannot be grave-goods of the Limbus, for the Lepchas, who are sufficiently aware of the customs of this neighboring tribe — would in this case have ascribed no special significance to such findings.

172 While people are farming on the plateau — especially during the spring plowing — potsherds are constantly discovered; understandably enough, these findings are connected by the local inhabitants to the legend of the tower. Despite repeated questioning I still have not yet succeeded in obtaining some of the findings for closer examination; apparently the unearthed fragments are heedlessly thrown away by the populace.

/895/ The conditions which prevail at present in the Tibetan-Indian border region make it impossible, for the time being, to undertake any extensive investigation on the spot, and particularly any systematic excavations. I must therefore limit myself here to the observation that, according to the statement of the local inhabitants,

172 the fragments reveal a clearly convex shape and seem to come from uncommonly strong pots made of baked clay. Until now I have been unable to determine whether other objects such as bones, tools, weapons, etc. are occasionally also found along with the fragments.

3. Explanations

173 In conclusion, after a short summary, I should like to attempt a
172 few explanations of what has been said above. —The stories that occur among many peoples of the world dealing with the Flood and the building of a tower reaching to the sky also belong to the oldest and most strongly rooted traditions of the Lepchas. The current version of the legend of the tower building places the site on the plateau of Laramdin. As a proof, so to speak, of the correctness of this tradition, it is cited that right up to the present day the fragments of the pots from which the tower supposedly was built can be found here. Yet it seems questionable to me whether the doubtlessly very old tower legend was always brought into connection with the discoveries made in Daramdin. I suspect rather that the first potsherd discoveries were made in the course of the more intensive farming carried out in this region during the last hundred years; these soon brought about a corresponding variation of the legend. Supporting this assumption is a remark contained in G. B. Mainwaring's A Grammar of the Rong (Lepcha) Language (Calcutta, 1876), one of the oldest publications about the Lepchas. The relevant passage, found on page XX of the Introduction, states: "On the top of the lofty Sung li hlo, it is said, a foolish class of Lepchas (Na ong), now extinct, endeavoured to raise a building high enough to reach the heavens. Rocks and blocks of stones as the ruins are shown on the place."

As is evident, in this version of the legend, written down more than seven decades ago, neither the plateau of Daramdin nor the use of clay pots is mentioned, and the place of the action is moved to the mountain Sung li hlo in the vicinity of Darjeeling.

172 It will be possible to give an absolutely sound explanation of the type and date of the discovered vessel fragments only after an intensive investigation of a large number of the findings. Possibly the potsherds stem from an early settlement that later was lost to oblivion. —The protected plateau would have offered a very favorable spot for such a settlement. Likewise it would not be out of the question that these settlers were Lepcha sibs or a people closely related to them, who used clay vessels as household objects.

114 /896/ In this connection, to be sure, I must supplement the
323 assertion concerning the pottery of the Lepcha which is found in G. Gorer's Himalayan Village (London, 1938), p. 67. As is stated in the above work, the generation of Lepchas living today in the reservation of Zongu has no knowledge of the art of pottery. Consequently copper, brass and porcelain pots of Nepalese, Chinese or even Western origin are used in their households; this statement corresponds to the observations I made among some of the Lepchas living outside the reservation. In addition, however, I was also able to find out that only two generations ago the art of pottery was practiced by a few men experienced in this trade, who on their part supplied the other [437] tribe members with the products of their work by way of barter. Their activity, to be sure, seems to have been limited to the manufacture of a type of vessel which was formerly used among the Lepchas. [415] These vessels called Tang ling fyŭ tyók generally had no handle and a short neck, and were rounded out most in the bottom third; at their broadest point they were about 30 centimeters in diameter. They were made of clay without the aid of a potter's wheel and were then baked. A few of these vessels are reputedly in use in a few remote places in Sikkim.

172 Also, the idea that the potsherds might come from urns or grave
764 goods should not be completely disregarded. Should this assumption prove to be correct, then it is possible that the former settlers were not Lepchas, for insofar as I have been able to ascertain on the basis of my investigations of the old burial practices of the Lepchas, cremation of the dead and disposal of the ashes in urns or the practice of placing jugs containing food in the grave was not customary among the Lepchas. (9)

9. Cf. R. Nebesky de Wojkowitz, "Ancient funeral ceremonies of the Lepchas," Eastern Anthropologist (Lucknow), 5, (1951).

4. Supplement

172 Only a short time after this article had gone to press, I succeeded in obtaining a few of the potsherds discovered in the region of Daramdin. In the majority of cases these were small fragments with edges that had already been greatly worn down. They consisted of clay shot through with mica. They vary according to the

172 degree of baking between a reddish brown and gray black in color. The pieces come from vessels of the most varied sizes: from small, thin walled bowls with a flared edge as well as also from larger containers with a wall several centimeters thick. Possibly the findings stem from various strata, for in part of them we are dealing with fragments of vessels prepared with the aid of a potter's wheel, whereas others are remnants of crude, thick-walled pots shaped by hand. /897/ By far the greater number of the findings reveal no ornamentation at all. Only on a few pieces there are three stripes of a dark color which run horizontally on the outer edge of the mouth of the vessel; one small item shows a vague, uncolored, serrated pattern /Wolfszahnmuster/ that was scratched into the surface.

Concerning the settlement of the Daramdim Plateau I was also able to obtain a little information from the members of the Limbu people who live in this region. According to them, Limbu farmers cleared at the beginning of the nineteenth century the virgin forest that covered great portions of this high plateau. In the course of this work they ran across a ruined stone tower which they carried away in order to make room for a field. —It seems here to be a question of one of the old stone watchtowers, a few of which even today are still standing in this part of the Nepalese-Tibetan border region. They are possibly fortifications from the time of the Great Tibetan Kingdom (9th century A.D.).

The local Limbus assert further that even in the valleys of the two rivers bordering the Daramdin estate potsherds are frequently found washed down there from the plateau by the rain.